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STAT

Women air Nicaraguan charges of CIA plot

by Carlton Smith
Times staff reporter

Nine months ago, Frances Romero sold her family's comfortable Laurelhurst home and left Seattle to join her husband, who had recently retired, in revolutionary Nicaragua.

It was a radical change for an American grandmother whose political taste had run to volunteering for the campaign of former Gov. Dan Evans and whose husband, Marco, had been a well-fixed engineer at Boeing.

For one thing, the Nicaraguan government was just about to climb to the top of President Reagan's hit parade as the Central American country the administration most loved to hate.

But the Romeros believed the world was growing smaller, and, as Frances Romero put it at the time, "We have to be concerned about the rest of the world or we won't survive ourselves."

On Wednesday, Frances Romero returned temporarily from Nicaragua with another Seattle woman, Gretchen Sleicher, and the two brought with them a substantially different view of the country that has frequently been portrayed in the United States as the bad actor of Central America.

They also carried a complete tape of the press conference held in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua last week in which the Nicaraguan government accused three U.S. diplomats of involvement in an unsuccessful plot to poison Nicaragua's foreign minister, Miguel D'Escoto, a Roman Catholic priest.

The women said they believe the tape is the first such complete copy of the charges laid against the U.S. officials to enter the country, at least through unofficial channels.

After accusing the three diplomats, the Nicaraguan government expelled them from the country.

The Reagan administration labeled the charges "ridiculous," closed six Nicaraguan consulates in this country and expelled 21 Nicaraguan officials, bringing the two countries to the lowest of a series of diplomatic low points.

Last night the women screened the tape for a few family members and a reporter.

On the tape, a young Nicaraguan woman named Marlene Moncada contends she was recruited to work for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency while she was a Nicaraguan consular official in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

When the Nicaraguan government transferred her back to Managua, Moncada said, the CIA

asked her to provide personal and political information on D'Escoto.

What the CIA did not realize, she said, was that she had already told the Nicaraguan government of the CIA's attempts to recruit her.

Moncada said she was asked by a CIA official she identified as "Baby Johnson" to give a bottle of poisoned wine to D'Escoto.

"I said, 'Me, eliminate a priest? Never!'" Moncada says on

the tape. But ultimately Moncada said she agreed to the alleged plot, and went to pick up the poisoned bottle of Benedictine liqueur.

Unknown to the CIA, according to the Nicaraguan government, much of the affair was captured on film, which was also included in the Nicaraguan government's presentation and on the tape.

When the Nicaraguan government tested the liqueur, it found the presence of a metallic element called thallium, which first would cause pain and cramps, drooping eyelids and difficulty in walking, then difficulty in speaking, trembling, inadvertent movements, convulsions and ultimately death.

The purpose of the poisoning, according to Moncada, was to render D'Escoto an ineffective spokesman for the Nicaraguan regime.

Moncada said the CIA man told her that the U.S. wanted D'Escoto "eliminated" as a spokesman for the Sandinistas because of the wide respect he had brought "communism" in international circles.

The alleged poison plot is yet more evidence that the Nicaragua that has been portrayed to Americans is not the real Nicaragua.

Romero and Sleicher said.

Contrary to reports circulated here, they said, there is not much evidence that Nicaraguans are turning against their government.

In fact, they said, the main problem facing the Sandinista regime is the attacks across the Honduran and Costa Rican borders by elements loyal to former Nicaraguan strongman Gen. Anastasio Somoza.

"There just isn't an uprising in Nicaragua," said Romero, in contrast to statements uttered previously by high-ranking Reagan administration officials.

The raiders, the two women said, engage in "very violent, brutal, terrorist techniques." In some areas, the rebels have resorted to kidnapping community leaders in the middle of the night for torture and assassination, they said.

Even more to the point, the two women contended that despite Reagan administration assertions, there is no flow of arms and war materiel across the Nicaragua-El Salvador border.

"There's never been any proof of that," Romero said. "It can't be proved in any way. I know that it's

not true. The country right now is so poor that they don't even have arms for themselves, let alone for them to go around supplying arms to other people."

As for reported political repression in Nicaragua, Romero and Sleicher said the reports have been mostly exaggerations based on propaganda disseminated by Somoza supporters.

Romero and Sleicher acknowledged, however, that not everyone in Nicaragua is happy with the Sandinistas. Those with wealth, Romero said, found themselves having to cope with a new order of things after the revolution.

"It is a revolution," Romero said, "and a revolution means a changing of priorities. What that means is that the country is no longer keeping the very wealthy living very well."

Romero will be in Seattle for two weeks before going to Albuquerque, N.M., to celebrate the birth of a grandchild. After two months she will return to Managua.

Both Romero and Sleicher will speak on their Nicaraguan experiences next Friday at the Unitarian Church at 6556 35th Ave. N.E.